Copy

Executive Registry
8-0233

17 March 1956

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

SUBJECT: Your Request to Chief of Reading Improvement
Branch for Information on Readability of
Office Memoranda.

This memorandum is for information
only.

In an interview of 24 January 1956,
you requested the Chief of the Reading
Improvement Branch to submit suggestions
to aid CIA employees in the preparation
of readable memoranda. Her response to
the request is incorporated in the
attached brief study, which describes
the organization and format of a readable
typewritten manuscript, and discusses the
effects of certain format features on
readability.

The study conforms in general to the
principles it sets forth. It is based on
an average findings.

25X1A9a

▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮
Acting Director of Training

Attachment

8/8/56

16 February 19__

READABILITY OF OFFICE MEMORANDA

I.   Introduction

This study describes certain organizational
and format features which make memoranda easier to
read. It is designed to assist CIA staff members
in the preparation of readable memoranda by express-
ing the reader's point of view. It conforms in
format to the principles it sets forth.

II.   Importance of Organization

Most people can read reasonably legible print
at rates of several thousand words per minute. Even
cable material can be accurately scanned at 1,000
words per minute, while 500 words per minute is a
rapid rate for thorough understanding of clearly
printed written information.

Poor organization of ideas retards reading
rate much more than such factors as size of print,
line length, and spacing. The reader can under-
stand a well-organized document with poor print
more readily than a poorly-organized, well-printed
document.

To be well organized, a typewritten manuscript
must have a clearly stated purpose, with an amount
of background information suitable to the purpose
and reader. Facts, evidence, and opinions are
arranged in an orderly pattern, for example: time-
sequence, problem-solution, cause-effect, or
opinion-reasons. Sentences and paragraphs are
short, simple, and direct. Vocabulary is simple,
and technical jargon is avoided. Conclusions are
explicitly formulated.

III.   Effect of Format on Readability

Format must be judiciously adapted to organ-
ization and subject matter. Important sections are

blackened by overtyping, or underscored, and sub-
titles indicate logical thought units. Paragraphs
are separated by spacing, and indented at least
two spaces. The manuscript may be single-spaced,
with black type of medium boldness on white paper.
Evidence suggests that lines should be 3 to 4
inches long, although the best line length for
typewritten print is not definitely established.

American typewriter print is one of the least
readable type faces. Since small variations in
other type faces do not affect readability, it is
unlikely that there are significant differences
among the different kinds of typewriters. Some
of the format characteristics which affect
readability of typewritten material are:

1. __Emphasis.__ Blackening important sections
by overtyping, or stressing the words which would
be emphasized in oral reading by capitalization or
underscoring can increase reading rate.

2. __Subtitles and paragraphs.__ Logically
arranged or numbered subtitles help the reader in
surveying his reading task. Further breakdown of
thoughts by paragraphing is also an aid.

3. __Length of line.__ The feasibility of pre-
paring all typewritten memoranda in lines no
longer than 4 inches should be considered.

The best line length varies for different
print faces, but it is around 88 millimeters, or
3½ inches. Typewritten matter presented in two
columns is definitely more readable than that in
long lines. Very short lines decrease the useful-
ness of peripheral vision, and excessively long
lines increase the frequency of eye pauses and
regressions.

The line length in this memorandum is
shortened to approximately 4 inches. The original
draft was typed in the usual line length of 6
inches. It was approximately 2½ pages, and
shortening the lines produced 3 pages in the final
form.

In any case, typewritten material should
always be prepared with very wide margins.

4. **Paragraph spacing and indentation.** Paragraph indentation and spacing between paragraphs increase reading rate substantially by separating thought units. Research indicates that reading ease is increased by indentation, but no evidence is available as to the best amount of indentation for typewriter print.

Paragraph numbering facilitates cross reference, but there is no evidence that it increases reading rate or comprehension.

5. **Line spacing.** Single-spaced manuscripts appear to be as easily read as double-spaced manuscripts.

One group of Agency employees read a single-spaced test at an average rate of 267 words per minute and answered 13 of 20 questions correctly. A comparable group read the same selection in double-spaced form at an average rate of 275 words per minute and answered 13 of 20 questions correctly. The difference of 8 words per minute is very small.

6. **Boldness.** Type "boldness" refers to both its heaviness and its darkness. Neither very bold nor very light type is as readable as type of medium boldness. Medium typewriter ribbons should be used, rather than heavy or light ribbons.

7. **Color schemes.** Black print on white or cream paper is the most readable color combination, because it provides maximum contrast.

IV. **Conclusions**

If writers apply the principles suggested above, memoranda will be more readable.

Further research needs to be done on line length, variations in typewriter print faces, and organizational principles.

25X1A9a